

# Perceptions of Children and Family: Comparisons between Seoul and the Other Cities of the “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities”

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The downward trend in South Korea's birth rate has become more severe, reaching a total fertility rate of 0.7, and natural population decline has already begun. Korean society is struggling to come up with countermeasures as the negative effects of population decline appear throughout society. Many experts have diagnosed various causes and suggested countermeasures for Korea's severely low birth rate, but human society does not exist in a vacuum and it is extremely difficult to clearly establish the causes of such social problems. In an attempt to explore this issue from a broader perspective, ten questions regarding perceptions of marriage, family, and children were included in the “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities.” This article presents the results of analysis undertaken on the survey data, which can provide insights into how family values and the burden of support may impact birth rates.

Raising a child is a fulfilling yet arduous task. The responses to the survey questions regarding the negative aspects of childbearing and childrearing are striking in the way that Seoul sticks out. The percentage

of respondents from Seoul between 18-30 years old who agreed that having children is a financial burden is 82 percent, which is overwhelmingly higher than that of the other Asian cities. Additionally, 79 percent thought that the freedom of parents would be restricted when children were born, and 80 percent thought that having children would limit the opportunities for one of the parents to continue with their career. In particular, the percentage of Seoul respondents who agreed that childbearing and childrearing resulted in financial burdens and career restrictions was 20-40 percent higher than that observed in the other cities of the survey. This indicates that the degree to which young adults in Seoul perceived the financial burden of children was much greater than that of the other cities in Asia.

Responses to questions regarding the positive aspects of having children and expectations of financial help from children in old age also showed a similar trend. Only 58 percent of young adults in Seoul agreed that “children are the greatest joy in life,” which is the second lowest percentage after young people in Tokyo (53 percent); in comparison, 77-96 percent of young adults

in other cities agreed with such a statement [Fig. 1]. The only cities where the percentage of young adult respondents agreeing to the financial burden of children was higher than the percentage of respondents agreeing that children were the greatest joy in life were Seoul (82 percent > 58 percent) and Tokyo (64 percent > 53 percent). Seoul was also the city where the lowest percentage (39 percent) of young adult respondents agreed that “adult children are a great help in old age.”

Expectations for mutual support among family members was another topic of interest. Questions asked in relation to this were as follows: (1) “Adult children should support some or all of their elderly parents' living expenses,” (2) “Parents should support their children's education to the extent of their financial ability,” (3) “Parents should help their children raise grandchildren.” Only 46 percent of young adults in Seoul agreed that adult children should cover the living expenses of their elderly parents, which was the lowest only after Tokyo (31 percent). Only 39 percent of young adults in Seoul agreed that their elderly parents should look after their grandchildren; in Taipei and Tokyo, the percentages were 20 percent and

25 percent, respectively. Additionally, only 44 percent of young adults in Seoul agreed with the statement that “parents should provide maximum support for their children's education,” which was the lowest among the surveyed cities.

The perceptions of young adults in Seoul that were revealed through the survey are rather shocking. Even if we acknowledge the possibility of there being systematic cultural differences in response patterns in the case of such worldwide surveys, it cannot be denied that the perception of young adults in Seoul regarding childbearing and childrearing is extremely negative compared to those in Asia's other cities. Therefore, this result of the “Social Values Survey in Asian Cities” indicates the need for further qualitative analysis to be undertaken on the possible contexts that may have resulted in the negative perceptions of children and family for Seoul's young adults, and to compare those contexts against those of Asia's other cities.

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Individual-level multiple regression analysis was also conducted for each city. In this case, analysis was conducted based on the assumption that the impact of holding meritocratic ideals on life satisfaction would vary, depending on which social class an individual belonged to. Figure 2 shows the size of the impact of the gap between the ideal and reality on life satisfaction by city. The number zero associated with each city name represents the lowest social class, and ten represents the highest social class. If the city is located above the zero horizon, it means that the larger the gap between the ideal and reality, the higher the satisfaction with life. Conversely, if it is located below zero, it means that the larger the gap, the lower the satisfaction. A few things stand out. First of all, regardless of social class, most groups are distributed below the horizontal line. This means that, in general, the larger the gap, the lower one's life satisfaction. Second, in most cities, it was found that the higher the social class, the more pronounced the negative effects of the gap. Thinking highly of the ideal of meritocracy, but facing a reality in which its practice is lacking, seems to have the effect of lowering life satisfaction among society's upper classes. Third, this trend was particularly evident in Jerusalem and Taipei. Fourth, in Jerusalem, Taipei, Jakarta, and Seoul, it was found that the lower the social class, a greater gap between the ideal and reality of meritocracy corresponded with higher life satisfaction.

It was confirmed that when the ideal of meritocracy is high but reality does not follow, life satisfaction is low, especially for people belonging to a high social class. In order to examine the effects of social class in terms of ideal and reality, the two were examined separately by applying individual-level multiple regression analysis. The left side of Figure 3 shows the impact of the ideal of meritocracy and the right side the impact of meritocracy's reality on life satisfaction. Similarly, the number zero refers to the lowest social class and ten refers to the highest social class. In terms of the ideal of meritocracy, the values generally cluster around the horizontal line, indicating that the ideal itself does not have a significant impact on life satisfaction. However, if one belongs to the lowest social class and has

a high ideal of meritocracy – especially in places like Taipei, Riyadh, and Seoul – a tendency to have higher life satisfaction is partially observed. On the other hand, the values for the reality of meritocracy are mostly located above the horizontal line, indicating that they generally have a positive effect on life satisfaction. The impact of the reality of meritocracy was clearly positive in cities particularly when social class was almost always high. This is probably because people belonging to high social classes have high life satisfaction and tend to believe that meritocracy is well realized in their society.

Taipei showed the most interesting results in the individual-level analysis examined above. Here, the effects of the ideal and reality of meritocracy on life satisfaction had opposite effects depending on social class. When social class is the lowest, a high ideal has the effect of increasing life satisfaction, but this effect gradually decreases as social class increases. On the other hand, believing that meritocracy is implemented in reality was negative for life satisfaction when the social class was low, but gradually changed in a positive direction as one's social class went up. This pattern was similarly observed in Seoul.

To conclude, belief in meritocracy, especially a situation in which there is a high ideal of meritocracy but reality does not follow, was found to have a negative relationship with life satisfaction. And this relationship was more pronounced for people of a high social class. When the ideal is too high or the reality was believed to be too low, people, especially those belonging to high social classes, showed low levels of life satisfaction. The best examples of this were the respondents from Taipei and Seoul. In these two cities, more than anywhere else, the higher the ideal, the lower the life satisfaction of people from higher social classes. Interestingly, these two cities, along with Tokyo, are the cities where the gap between the ideal and reality of meritocracy was found to be the widest and where people's life satisfaction was found to be the lowest.

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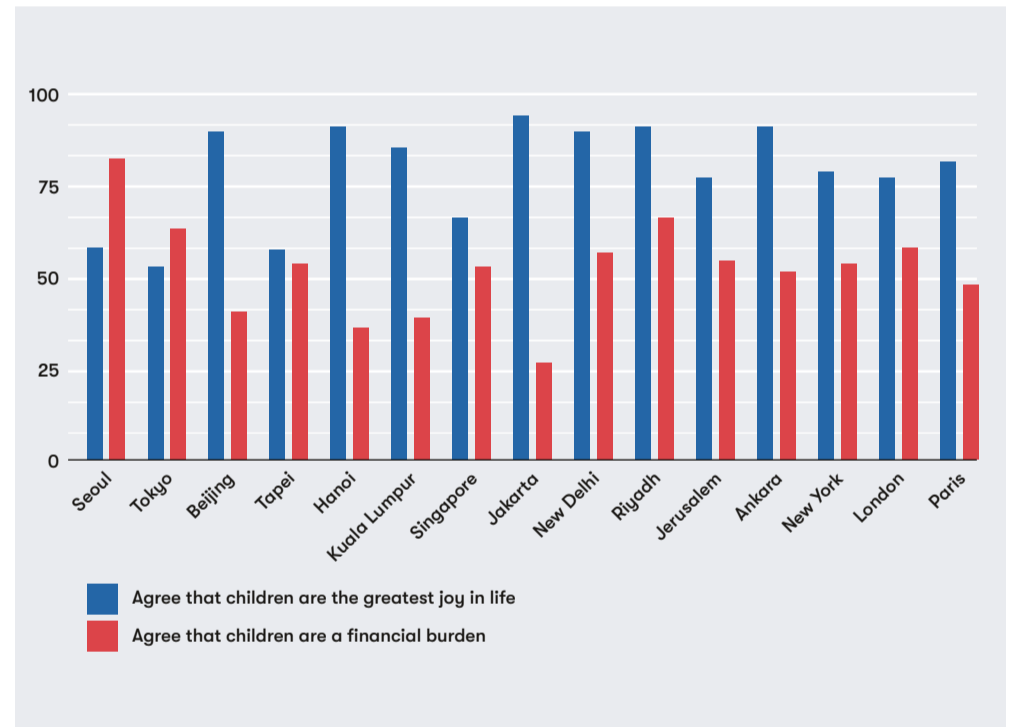


Fig. 1 (above): Percentage of young adults who agreed to the statement that children were (1) the greatest joy in life and (2) a financial burden, according to city. (Figure courtesy of the author, 2023)

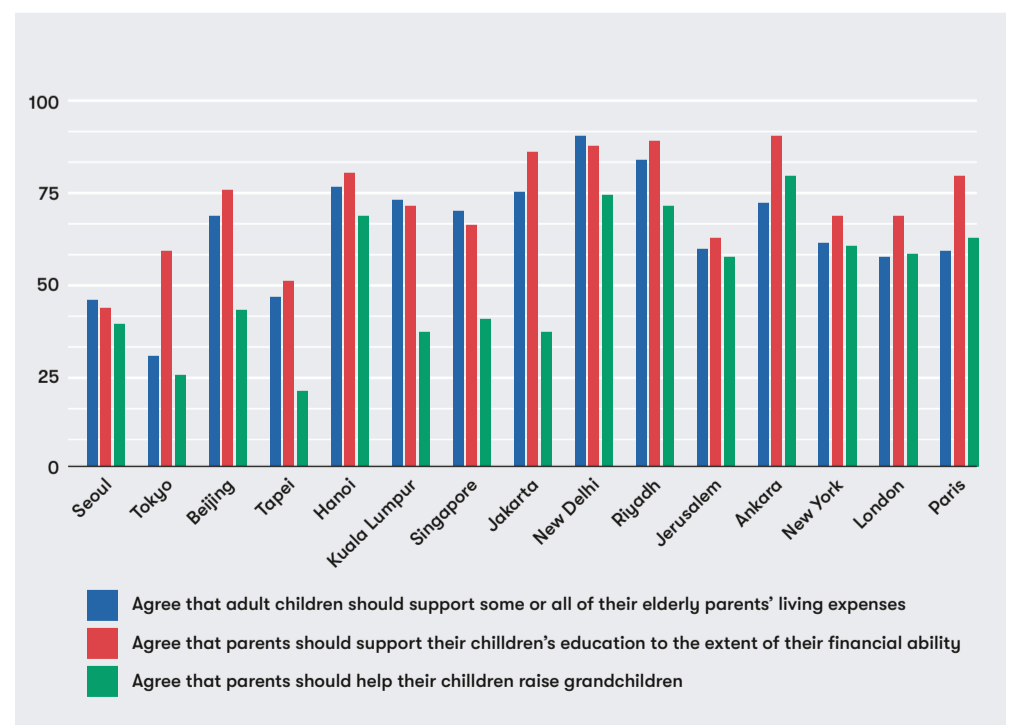


Fig. 2 (above): Percentage of young adults who agreed to the following statements: (1) adult children should support some or all of their elderly parents' living expenses, (2) parents should support their children's education to the extent of their financial ability, and (3) parents should help their children raise grandchildren according to city. (Figure courtesy of the author, 2023)